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JACKIE ROBINSON

Jackie Robinson made history in 1947 when he broke baseball's color barrier to play for the Brooklyn Dodgers. A talented player, Robinson won the National League Rookie of the Year award his first season, and helped the Dodgers to the National League championship – the first of his six trips to the World Series. In 1949 Robinson won the league MVP award, and he was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1962. Despite his skill, Robinson faced a barrage of insults and threats because of his race. The courage and grace with which Robinson handled the abuses inspired a generation of African Americans to question the doctrine of “separate but equal” and helped pave the way for the Civil Rights Movement.

When general manager Branch Rickey of the Brooklyn Dodgers offered Robinson the chance to break organized baseball's powerful but unwritten color line, the fiery ballplayer not only accepted, he also agreed to Rickey's condition: that he not respond to the abuse he would face.

DID YOU KNOW?

In 1997, 50 years after Robinson integrated baseball his number, 42, was permanently retired by every team in Major League Baseball.

Jackie Robinson's debut in organized baseball is a legend (April 18, 1946, with the Montreal Royals of the International League, the Dodgers' best farm club). In five at-bats he hit a three-run homer and three singles, stole two bases, and scored four times, twice by forcing the pitcher to balk. Promoted to the Dodgers the following spring, Robinson thrived on the pressure and established himself as the most exciting player in baseball. His playing style combined traditional elements of black sports—the opportunistic risk taking known as “tricky baseball” in the Negro Leagues—with an aggressiveness asserting his right to be at the plate or on the basepaths. According to his manager Leo Durocher, “This guy didn’t just come to play. He come to beat ya.”

In their response to Jackie Robinson, African-Americans rejected “separate but equal” status and embraced integration. Robinson's presence in baseball electrified them, and they flocked to see the Dodgers in huge numbers and from great distances. African-American sportswriters, many of whom had advocated baseball integration for years, focused their attentions on Robinson and the black players who followed him. His success encouraged the integration of professional football, basketball, and tennis, while the Negro Leagues, which in a sense depended on segregation, began an irreversible decline, losing ballplayers, spectators, and reporters.

During his first two years with the Dodgers, Robinson kept his word to Rickey and endured astonishing abuse amid national scrutiny without fighting back. His dignified courage in the face of virulent racism—from jeers and insults to beanballs, hate mail, and death threats—commanded the admiration of whites as well as blacks and foreshadowed the tactics that the 1960s civil rights movement would develop into the theory and practice of nonviolence.

Robinson, however, finally broke his emotional and political silence in 1949, becoming an outspoken and controversial opponent of racial discrimination. He criticized the slow pace of baseball integration and objected to the Jim Crow practices in the southern states where most clubs conducted spring training. Robinson led other ballplayers in urging baseball to use its economic power to desegregate southern towns, hotels, and ballparks. Because most baseball teams integrated relatively calmly, the “Jackie Robinson experiment” provided an important example of successful desegregation to ambivalent white southern political and business leaders.

Having watched baseball integrate through a combination of individual black achievements, white goodwill, economic persuasion, and public outspokenness, Robinson, when he retired from baseball in 1957, sought to bring the same tactics to bear on increasing African-American employment opportunities.

His lifelong struggle continued to his last public appearance nine days before he died: he told television viewers of an Old-Timers’ Game, “I’d like to live to see a black manager.” Fittingly, his eulogy was delivered by the outstanding advocate of African-American self-help and employment opportunity—the Reverend Jesse Jackson. “When Jackie took the field,” Jackson declared, “something reminded us of our birthright to be free.”

Jules Tygiel, *Baseball’s Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy* (1984).

WARREN GOLDSTEIN

The Reader’s Companion to American History. Eric Foner and John A. Garraty, Editors. Copyright © 1991 by Houghton Mifflin

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Article Details:

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History.com Staff

Website Name

History.com

Year Published

2009

Title

Jackie Robinson

URL

<http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/jackie-robinson>

Access Date

December 17, 2014

Publisher

A+E Networks

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